

*NPS collections document the units of the Park Service themselves—the people, the plants, the past, the present—for reference and use in the future. We must use the data that has been recorded over the years; we must share as much information as we can with as many disciplines and institutions as we can. The following articles illustrate the importance of documentation.*

Connie Hudson Backlund

## It's a Matter of Time The Value of Documentation

**I**t's a tall bookcase reaching from the floor to the ceiling typical of bookcases at the Carl Sandburg Home. It, like the others, is brimming with books. These books are, however, different from the usual literary works associated with the site. They are the catalog records for Carl Sandburg Home NHS, and this particular bookcase stands in the corner of the curatorial office at the park.

The years between 1988 and 1991 were especially productive for the catalogers of the



*Photo of Carl Sandburg oil painting exhibited in the main house at the Carl Sandburg National Historic Site. Photo by Barry E. Madjerich. Eastern National Park & Monument Association post-card.*

Sandburg collection. It was a period of concentrated effort to properly catalog the 220,000 objects donated by Mrs. Sandburg.

So the questions are asked—is it worth it and what value does it serve? What value does it serve as we constantly juggle so many important preservation and visitor needs? All those records, from floor to ceiling, are duplicated on the computer database. Worth the investment?

I suspect Garrison Keillor, of *Prairie Home Companion* fame, best answered those questions in a broadcast from the Mark Twain Home in Hartford, Connecticut. While handling a cue ball, Keillor inadvertently broke it. The site's curator standing nearby thoughtfully commented, "It was just a matter of time?" Keillor noted, "Those are hard words for a curator to say!"

Hard but true! Our best efforts to monitor and preserve will gain us longer **temporary** control. In the preface to her biography of Carl Sandburg, Penelope Niven describes "sweltering weeks on hands and knees at Connemara searching for Sandburg papers under the eaves, in the attic, in the cellar," and "day after day battling mold, mildew, mice, and time for custody? Time will ultimately win. When it does, we hope to be ready."

A catalog of museum objects is much like an inventory of plant and animal species in a natural area. Whether it follows a national event like the Valdez Oil Spill in Alaska or is conducted locally on a county-wide basis, it makes good sense to know what we have.

The museum records are an important part of what we in the National Park Service preserve at a site. What we know of our past and the interpretive stories we tell tomorrow are supported by our documentation today, for ... it is just a matter of time.

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